Cracking up

'Cracking Up: Interpreting the Crime Scene(s) in Claudia Piñeiro's *Las grietas de Jara*'

Abstract:

Las grietas de Jara (2009), like many fictional works of Claudia Piñeiro (Argentina, b. 1960), employs certain recognizable elements of the crime novel. [1] Although no police or detectives ever investigate, this novel has a buried crime scene at its core, around which the plot is constructed. In summary, a firm of architects has rid itself of a troublesome neighbour, Nelson Jara, who was interrupting their construction work by persistently complaining of a crack in his wall. The scene of Jara's death is the building site itself; his body is flung into the concrete foundations. The completed building then becomes the architects' office, guarding their guilty secret. I examine the centrality of this subterranean crime scene to Piñeiro's novel, where construction as/over the scene of a crime lends itself forcefully to symbolic and ethical interpretation.

Introduction:

Claudia Piñeiro won the Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in 2010 for her fourth novel, *Las grietas de Jara* [*A Crack in the Wall* (2013)]. This novel – along with three of her other novels which also incorporate crime fiction elements to varying extents, *Las viudas de los jueves* (2005) [*Thursday Night Widows* (2009)], *Elena sabe* (2007) [*Elena Knows*] and *Betibú* (2011) [*Betty Boo* (2016)] – topped the best-sellers list in Argentina, riding the wave of popularity for crime fiction which began in the 1990s (de Rosso 2014: 121). Its screen adaptation premiered in 2018, and the cover of the novel's second edition features the lead actors. [2] Before focusing on the crime scene(s) in *Las grietas de Jara* (henceforth *Las grietas…*), I shall sketch out how *Las grietas…* dialogues with current trends within crime fiction.

As Ben Bollig observes, 'Much recent writing on crime fiction and on Latin-American crime fiction in particular has focussed on the genre's potential for social and political critique' (2017: 505). Piñeiro's novels listed above, as well as *Tuya* [*All Yours*] (2005) which clearly belongs to the genre of crime fiction, do exploit this potential for critique, but they do so obliquely by focusing on the ethical choices of individuals, who are nevertheless inevitably operating within (or coming up against) the wider patterns of their society's constraints. We learn, for instance, that the firm of architects portrayed in *Las grietas…* has, over the course of its history, moved from laudable social housing projects to profit-driven sharp practices exploiting every plot of land to the maximum without regard for ethical considerations, and such ruthless capitalism and lack of humanity is implicitly criticized in the course of the novel.

In examining how it is that novels such as Piñeiro's *Las viudas…* came to be huge best-sellers, de Rosso attributes the phenomenon to changes in the history of the crime novel in Argentina, which have redefined the genre's boundaries. He discerns 'una articulación en patchwork en el que diversos motivos activan la memoria textual y remiten a la historia del género, que entonces "tiñe" el relato de policial' [a patchwork structure in which various elements activate textual memory and send us back to the history of the genre, which then "tinges" the story with

[1] All translations of the main text are taken from Miranda France's published translation, *A Crack in the Wall*, except where otherwise indicated. Translations of other material are mine.

[2] *Las grietas de Jara*, directed by Nicolás Gil Lavedra (2018). See Reinoso (2018).

crime fiction] (2014: 118). We can see three elements in *Las grietas…* which activate our crime fiction reading strategies in this way: the crime scene, the victim, and the idea of an investigative process. However, in this novel, our crime fiction reading strategies prove inadequate as we find that the human, emotional and (un)ethical dimensions prevail, leaving the obvious crime uninvestigated as far as legal procedures are concerned, and other moral crimes ongoing.[3]

Taking these three elements in turn, the crime scene in *Las grietas…*, rather than being a site for investigative prowess, becomes a touchstone for the (in)authenticity of the characters. Officially speaking, it is never recognized as the scene of a crime, since it remains buried, unreported and uninvestigated; nevertheless, its effects are felt on the characters and on how their lives develop subsequently. As regards the victim, there are various possible interpretations. Is the victim purely the person who gets killed? In which case the eponymous Jara is the victim. Or is the victim also the struggling individual squashed by the system? This perspective is frequently encouraged by the *novela negra* [noir novel] and *neopolicíaco* [neo crime fiction] traditions, the latter also showing disillusion with lost idealism (Coello Gutiérrez 2013: 77). Jara simulates being that kind of victim, whilst in fact playing the system. Likewise, the investigative process as the third element which activates our crime fiction reading strategies is undermined; the secondary character Leonor is marginally identifiable as an investigator by virtue of making enquiries about Jara's whereabouts, but purely from self-interest, since she is squatting in his empty flat with a view to taking possession of it. Thus all these generic elements (crime scene, victim, investigation) effectively activate the desire for a genre which has clear parameters and closure, but then present us with something different, displacing the expected generic framework and leaving us 'delightfully chilled' (Rigby 2013: 68).

Displacement and inversion as means of engagement with the genre link Piñeiro to broader currents in Argentine crime fiction. For example, in her analysis of Argentine José Pablo Feinmann's *Últimos días de la víctima* [*Last Days of the Victim*] (1979) Natalia Jacovkis (2011) explores how the novel from the outset plays on the reader's expectation of there being an identifiable victim; she also notes that since Rodolfo Walsh's *Operación masacre* [*Operation Massacre*] (1957) we have the idea of the state as complicit with the crime (2011: 47). In *Las grietas…*, as mentioned, the focus is not on the state as criminal, but on the corporate sector, implicitly critiquing neoliberalism and profit-driven practices. Piñeiro thus dialogues with what have become new practices of the genre regarding ambiguous victim roles, absence of investigation, sociopolitical critique and disillusionment, but she nuances these by then focusing inwards on the internal psychological dilemmas of the protagonist, and the grey zones of (in)fidelity, complicity and fluctuating idealism.

Las grietas de Jara: summary

Before considering the crime scene in more detail, it is pertinent to consider its setting, as it is firmly anchored in Buenos Aires. In this respect, it fits Juan Hernández Luna's description of the *neopolicíaco*, as quoted by Close: 'To hell with detectives and investigation. Crime is only a pretext for narrating cities' (2006: 149). There is frequent reference to specific named streets and identifiable buildings, such as Palanti's iconic 'Edificio de los Atlantes' [Atlas Building] on Rivadavia, or Colombo's 'Casa de los lirios' [House of the Lilies] on Hipólito Yrigoyen. These Art Nouveau

[3] As is noted by Diego Batlle (2018) with reference to the screen adaptation.

splendours of the city evoke the period of Buenos Aires' exuberant expansion in the early twentieth century, with mid and late twentieth-century developments indicated by reference to Ezeiza airport and the Ecological Reserve. This geographical setting is overlaid with historical and political reference by the knowing use of verbs such as 'desaparecer' [to disappear], which activate associations with Argentina's more recent traumatic history of disappearances and state repression during the 'Guerra Sucia' [Dirty War] or 'Proceso de Reorganización Nacional' ['Process of National Reorganization'] under the military *junta* (1976-83). Narrating its location may not be the primary aim, but nevertheless, establishing Buenos Aires as the setting serves to direct the critique of individual ethical compromise and loss of idealism towards a particular context which adds greater resonance to it.

Against this Buenos Aires backdrop we can consider the circumstances leading to the crime. In outline, a firm of architects, *Borla y Asociados* (the partners Mario Borla and Marta Horvat, and their associate, Pablo Simó), have rid themselves of a troublesome local resident, Nelson Jara, who had been seeking compensation for a crack that their construction work appeared to be causing in his flat adjoining their building site. Late one night, Pablo – through whom the third person narrative is focalized – is summoned by Borla to the site, where he is confronted with Jara's dead body. Borla and Marta are at the scene, but their story that Jara tried to sexually harass Marta, and was accidentally killed by slipping and falling on mud when Borla confronted him, does not ring true for Pablo, especially when he subsequently notices evidence of a blow on Jara's forehead, and finds a blood-stained hammer amongst the rubbish. The building, whose foundations constitute what Pablo and the reader now confidently assume to be a staged crime scene, [4] subsequently becomes a concrete tomb forever encasing Jara's body, with the rest of the building being hastily completed over it in the following days. It thereafter houses the offices of *Borla y Asociados*, whose ruthless determination to overrule all objections to their construction work led to the sequence of events culminating in the crime which is now firmly cemented into the building. This idea of profit-driven construction work leading to a crime, and then subsequently further constructing over the scene of that crime, effectively building a criminal act into the very fabric, lends itself forcefully to symbolic interpretation. The construction theme is emphasized in the structure of the novel, through narrative layerings and juxtapositions, for example the scene of Nelson Jara's body in the basement is juxtaposed by a flashback with the first meeting between Pablo and Jara (56).

Scene 1: construction as cover-up

That this principal crime scene is a construction site is particularly significant, since from the novel's opening, the activity of architectural construction in the metropolis of Buenos Aires is seen as morally compromised, by virtue of the fact that 'en Buenos Aires antes de poner un solo ladrillo hay que elegir primero un edificio y condenarlo a desaparecer' [in Buenos Aires, before laying a single brick, you first have to choose a building and condemn it to disappear] (14).[5] What can be read as mere pragmatic realism on the part of a practising architect regarding urban density is darkened by the strength and the connotations of the word 'desaparecer' in the Argentine context, which

[4] 'A simulated or staged crime scene is one in which the physical evidence has been purposefully altered by the offender[s] to mislead authorities or misdirect the investigation.' (Turvey and Chisum, 2011: 212).
[5] My translation. France translates the last phrase as 'condemning it to annihilation' (9), which alters the political resonance of the verb 'desaparecer'.

inevitably lead us to think of a political interpretation, where a society is (re)built in a space previously inhabited by others who have now been condemned to 'disappear'. It is perhaps these dark connotations which are picked up on by Rigby's review, which notes that 'Buenos Aires takes on an eerie, oppressive nature' (2013: 67). Although no political connection with the theme of *desaparecidos* [disappeared people / disappearances] is made, the associations of the word are unavoidable, and later in the novel, in the context of major construction projects such as the underground, the Buenos Aires-Ezeiza motorway, Ital Park or the Ecological Reserve (215), a series of rhetorical questions touches once again upon the topic: '¿Cuántos vivos habrán sido enterrados bajo el suelo de Buenos Aires? ¿Cuántos muertos de los que nunca nadie se enteró? ¿Cuántos muertos negados?' (214) ['How many people have been buried alive in the soil of Buenos Aires? How many deaths that nobody ever found out about? How many deaths denied?' (France 2013: 187)]. Buenos Aires is subsequently described as 'una ciudad con tanto muerto fuera del cementerio' (215) ['A city where so many of the dead lie outside the cemetery walls' (France 2013: 188)], and the emphasis placed on this subject through repetition indicates that this goes beyond reference to construction workers accidentally killed during building projects, and evokes the many *desaparecidos* from the period of the Dirty War whose bodies have never been recovered.[6] Indeed, as Roy Ketchum points out, the clandestine detention centre known as 'El Club Atlético' [The Athletics Club] was one of the buildings demolished to make way for the 25 de Mayo highway (2010: 11).

This dark panorama of construction as complicit with cover-up is set against a tenuous idealism, manifested through the character of Pablo. For many years, he has been sketching a building, 'una torre de once pisos que mira al Norte' (11) ['an eleven-storey tower facing North' (France 2013: 9)] which he does not want to build 'sobre los escombros de otra cosa' (14) ['on the rubble of something else' (France 2013: 10)], but rather 'sobre un terreno donde no haya que llorar a nadie' (14) [on ground where there is no need to mourn for anyone].[7] So again, we have the hint of a political interpretation; looking to the North could obviously refer to North America, but it could also indicate North in a more metaphorical sense, a guiding North which will give orientation and purpose.[8] Taken together, these ideals seem to indicate seeking a guilt-free space for his construction, a *tabula rasa*, and at the level of the country perhaps indicate a future in which Argentina can begin to move on from the troubled history of mourning disappeared persons.

Within this geopolitical context, the crime scene itself, buried in the very foundations of the architects' studio, is the clearest manifestation of this construction as cover-up. The laboured repetition of the word 'saber' [to know] underlines the ironic contrast between their clear knowledge and the opacity of the concrete, which prevents others from knowing or seeing the evidence.

> Cómo negar lo que Pablo sabe, y que sabe que Marta sabe, y que sabe que Borla sabe: que Nelson Jara está muerto, enterrado unos metros más abajo de las baldosas de alto tránsito sobre las que caminan ellos tres

[6] For an interesting meditation on how Argentina might go forward whilst engaging with this aspect of its past, see Roy Ketchum (2010).

[7] My translation. France has 'without anyone shedding tears for what was there before' (2013: 10), which transfers the sense of mourning to the lost buildings, rather than lost people.

[8] I am thinking of Uruguayan visual artist Joaquín Torres García, whose inverted map of the Americas with the caption 'Porque en realidad, nuestro norte es el Sur' [Because in reality, our north is the South] plays on 'norte' in this sense.

> cada día al entrar o salir de esa oficina, bajo la losa del piso de las cocheras, exactamente donde lo enterraron aquella noche, tres años atrás (17).
>
> How can Pablo deny what he knows, and what Marta knows, and what Borla knows: that Nelson Jara is dead, buried a few feet beneath the heavy-wear tiles over which the three of them walk every day on their way into or out of the office, under the concrete floor of the parking lot, exactly where they left him that night, three years ago. (France 2013: 12)

The crime scene is buried physically, as the three architects try to bury and repress it deep within their memories, but they have to tread over it to get to work every day, highlighting the fact that they cannot avoid going over it repeatedly in their daily lives. They are condemned to having their office there, lest if they vacate it someone else should knock the building down and discover their guilty secret. The symbolism is further underlined, with Pablo apparently having been described by Borla to Jara as an expert in excavations and demolitions (59), themselves highly suggestive terms potentially investing the lexicon of uncovering and unmaking buildings with a metaphorical weight which hints at the psyche and ideas of self-exploration and emotional precariousness. Once again, we can interpret this 'going over' the crime on a daily basis in a wider, national context; literally that of the excavation of buildings such as the previously mentioned 'Club Atlético' (Ketchum 2010: 11), but also the idea of the perpetrators of disappearances in Buenos Aires being forcibly reminded of *desaparecidos* by the continual presence in the media of stories related to HIJOS, to the Madres and Abuelas of the Plaza de Mayo, and to children of the disappeared, abducted and adopted by military families.[9]

The lack of closure both in psychological and (traditional detective) narrative terms is patent, since the precise circumstances of Jara's death are never officially investigated; indeed, it is never 'officially' registered that he has died, he is simply no longer around. Neither is the veracity of Pablo's surmised version of events ever confirmed. He simply pieced it together from what he saw and heard, from 'suspicions and hunches' (France 2013: 139). Nevertheless, Pablo the not-quite-witness erases the blatant clue of the bloodied hammer, becoming coerced into complicity out of loyalty to the presumed perpetrators of the crime: 'pactaron entre ellos –Marta, Borla y Pablo- qué dirían y qué no' (20) ['agreeing among themselves – Marta, Borla and Pablo – what they would and wouldn't say' (France 2013: 14)]. They share knowledge, guilt and responsibility, Borla and Horvat apparently acting in 'concert', and Pablo complicit with them. It is easy for Pablo, with hindsight, to rescript his involvement in the crime; given the same situation again, we are told (via indirect free style which underlines the ironic opacity of his subjectivity) that 'no limpiaría la escena ni callaría' (99) ['he wouldn't clean up the scene; he wouldn't keep quiet' (France 2013: 82)]. This does not satisfy his conscience, however, and during the three years following he continually replays and reimagines the events.

At times, the crime scene is viewed as a kind of battleground between Marta and Jara (170) in which Marta is the loser because Jara – knowing the firm were unwilling to meet his compensation demands – vengefully perforated a water main, in order to sabotage the ongoing construction process by flooding the site. At other times, Pablo views the crime scene as a kind of performance and he lays the blame on fate: 'Tal vez simplemente lo llevó allí el destino, lo puso en el escenario donde debía desempeñar el rol de testigo' (115) ['Perhaps it was fate that led him there and

[9] HIJOS stands for Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio [Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence]. http://www.hijos-capital.org.ar/

placed him on that stage to be a witness' (France 2013: 96)]. This vocabulary of performance reinforces Pablo's tacit recognition that Marta and Borla to some extent staged the crime scene, and the idea of performance as linked to the crime scene will become more crucial as the plot develops, since the roles to which characters are assigned – Pablo as witness, Jara as victim – become porous, ill-defined, and characters begin to take on other roles or to metamorphose into different kinds of characters. In a manner faintly reminiscent of the role reversal in Jorge Luis Borges's 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' [The Theme of the Traitor and the Heroe] (1944), which also foregrounds theatricality, the apparent victim Jara is found posthumously to have been 'canalla' (despicable), faking evidence of subsistence damage by making a crack in his own wall in order to file false compensation claims and get money by playing the system.[10] Likewise, Pablo himself, initially a suspicious almost-witness, is drawn – at Borla's urging – into helping to throw Jara's dead body into the muddy foundations. By forceful assertion of the verb 'saber', Borla coerces Pablo into accepting that what he *says* happened is unquestionably the truth, rather than a constructed narrative open to doubt: 'Nosotros *sabemos* que fue un accidente protagonizado por un tipo de mierda, por un tipo que estuvo a punto de violar a Marta' (175) ['We *know* that this was an accident, befalling a first-class shit, a would-be rapist' (France 2013: 150)] (all italics mine). Pablo is awkwardly conscious of the ambiguity in his assigned role; he has 'la sensación extraña de no poder definir si acababa de participar en un crimen o en un acto heroico' (181) ['the strange sensation of not knowing for sure whether he had just taken part in a crime or an act of heroism' (France 2013: 156)], which again activates the crime genre whilst simultaneously questioning it.

This principal crime scene, then, is the site of many different actions and performances of varying degrees of deception and criminality. Firstly, and in the widest context outlined above, it is a building site where previous buildings have been 'condemned to disappear' to make way for new construction. It then becomes the site of a crime of sabotage at the hands of Jara. Subsequently it becomes a staged crime scene where Marta and Borla attempt to make their elimination of Jara (petty fraudster and saboteur) look like the accidental death of a 'would-be rapist'. The site then becomes the foundation of a building which acts as metaphor for the psyche, both of the individuals involved and also at the level of the Argentine state, with its buried and repressed – yet continually resurfacing – violent memories; and finally it becomes the scene for 'business as usual', with ruthless construction and fraudulent practices set to continue into the future with no conceivable endpoint and no satisfying closure to the crimes enacted within and beyond its walls.

Scene 2: construction and cracking up

Our second crime scene is that of Jara's flat, adjoining the construction site discussed above, where – as we learn in chapter thirteen – the 'canalla' Jara meticulously enlarged the crack in his wall on a daily basis, hoping to extort compensation from the construction company. Jara is therefore not, as he first appears, a victim of ruthless capitalist constructors, but rather a seasoned fraudulent player of the system. Jara had presented the architects with photographic 'evidence' of the crack in his wall (59-60) but Pablo's characterization of Jara as resembling a travelling tie salesman (58) underlines the fact that his testimony strikes a false note; it is a performance with a desire to persuade. His minor, yet still classifiably 'criminal' action, and its crime scene give rise to the crack(s) of the novel's

[10] France generally renders 'canalla' as 'vermin' (though occasionally also as 'scumbag'), adding a rat-like, subterranean dimension to the original term which is in keeping with its negative and low-life connotations.

title (plural in the original Spanish and singular in the English version), which is linked by an epigraph to F. Scott Fitzgerald's brief autobiographical essay, 'The Crack-Up' (1936a). This intertextual reference connects mental cracking up to external physical cracks; in the case of Fitzgerald, mental breakdown is pictured as a crack in the vast geological gorge of the Grand Canyon, whilst in Piñeiro, Jara's apparent mental cracking up is associated with the crack in the wall of his flat. As we progress through the novel, we see that the Fitzgerald intertext, with its claustrophobic tone of mental and emotional crisis, not only applies to the mental and physical cracks of the eponymous Jara, but also chimes with the mid-life crisis of Pablo in his marriage. Fitzgerald's confessional first person 'saw that for a long time [he] had not liked people and things, but only followed the rickety old pretence of liking', and this rickety old pretence is what Pablo eventually escapes from, by leaving his wife and setting up by himself in a separate apartment. In this respect, as proposed earlier, the crime scene becomes a kind of touchstone for characters' (in)authenticity; their manner of involvement or engagement with the crime scene forces them to confront themselves.

In the case of Pablo, discovering Jara's fraudulent performance through examining the crack in his wall also leads Pablo to recognize a similarly despicable streak in his own nature. Jara had pestered Pablo to come and examine the crack in his wall to ascertain the extent of the damage supposedly caused by Borla's construction work, but Pablo deliberately fobbed Jara off, and never went to his flat, a fact which had made Pablo feel himself to be 'canalla'. This sin of omission becomes relevant with the arrival of a young girl Leonor, who comes three years after Jara's death to the Calle Giribone office looking for Jara and with whom Pablo begins what will be a brief but catalytic relationship. Pablo makes a pact with himself about what he will and will not reveal to Borla of his several meetings with Leonor: 'Pablo se queda preguntándose qué […] le contará a Borla, y qué no' (51) ['Pablo wonders which aspects […] he will relay to Borla, and which not' (France 2013: 41)]. This phrasing ('qué … y qué no') is strongly reminiscent of the pact of silence made between Borla, Marta and Pablo. Once again, Pablo is involved in a deceitful pact, but here the deceit is initiated by him, showing him to be increasingly less innocent and idealistic.

The plotting is particularly effective at this point, since Leonor – after wandering the streets of Buenos Aires with Pablo, photographing his favourite buildings – takes him back to her flat, which turns out to be none other than that in the Calle Giribone formerly occupied by Jara. Jara is thus highly present in Pablo's mind as he enters the flat with Leonor, and all his guilt about the events of that night three years earlier floods back, leaving him with the feeling that 'otra vez, pelea cuerpo a cuerpo con Jara' (158) ['once again, he is fighting body-to-body with Jara' (France 2013: 133)]. But despite his foreboding, Pablo inevitably commits (the crime of) adultery, he is literally 'cuerpo a cuerpo' with Leonor, and his sexual excitement is in fact greatly heightened by imagining the *as yet unseen* crack in the wall of the flat, which has been theatrically hidden behind an Indian wall hanging:

> lo que la tela oculta lo excita más aun y mientras se mete dentro de la chica […], la invade y la penetra, Pablo Simó piensa en esa grieta, y eso, la unión de la imagen de la pared rajada superpuesta al cuerpo tibio y sudado […] hace que la tensión de su propio cuerpo llegue a un punto al que no recuerda haber llegado antes (160).
>
> What's hidden by the hanging fuels his excitement, and as he goes inside the girl […], possesses her, penetrates her, Pablo Simó can't stop thinking about the crack and that, the image of the slashed wall superimposed on the warm and sweaty body […] brings all the tension in his own body to a climax more powerful than anything he remembers experiencing before (France 2013: 135-136).

The almost comically blatant sexual aspect of the imagery, implicitly linking Leonor's vagina with the crack in the wall, metaphorically prepares the way for the real moment of tension and revelation, which is the moment of 'draw[ing] aside this veil' (France 2013: 136) to finally examine the actual crack in the wall itself. As Roland Barthes observes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, 'is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes*? […] the entire excitation takes refuge in the *hope* of seeing the sexual organ' (1976: 9-10), or in this case, of seeing the crack in the wall which is mentally associated with the sexual organ. In this way, the sexual act and the revelation of a crime are brought closer, through mechanisms of tension, anxiety and release. Once again, as at the original crime scene, theatricality and deceit are uppermost: 'esa tela finge ser lo que no es, que no es ni una cortina, ni un tapiz, ni un cuadro, aunque pretenda serlo' (160) ['This cloth is masquerading as something it isn't, […] it's not a curtain, nor a hanging or a picture, though it pretends to be one of those things' (France 2013: 136)]. When he finally draws the cloth aside and examines the crack, he finds it is perfectly straight, uniform in its width and depth, with small biro marks at regular intervals along it; there is no doubt in Pablo's mind that Jara himself had made and continually extended the crack with a chisel. So the revelation of Jara's crime of fraudulent compensation claims requires the reader to reassign roles. Jara is still a victim, in that he was – we assume – killed by Marta and Borla to avoid further interference in the construction process; yet he is no longer an 'innocent' victim. He too is revealed to have been playing the system, or at least attempting to.

What also emerges from this second crime scene is the fact that significant moments of intimacy of Pablo go hand in hand with scenes of crime. Here, Jara's fraudulent crack is the stimulating backdrop for his adulterous intimacy with Leonor, who herself is employed by a questionable company whose declared business of debt collection is a front for their real activity of locating empty properties in which to squat, with a view to eventually taking possession of them. And earlier in the novel, when he is in bed with his wife Laura, touching her body, the TV in their bedroom is showing a crime scene and corpse; the juxtaposition of reality with this image, and the recollection of Marta Horvat which is triggered by the woman police officer on screen, lead Pablo to project Marta onto his wife's body, imagining rapidly a sequence of events in which his wife is dead, thereby leaving him free to be with Marta. Obviously this fantasy realization of his desire to be with a different woman acts as a pre-echo of the previously analysed scene with Leonor.

This second crime scene, then, like the first, is many-layered. On the most basic level, it is where a crime of fraudulent faking of evidence takes place (perpetrated by Jara with intent to deceive and extract monetary benefit); subsequently it becomes the locus for another fraudulent activity in preparation (Leonor, as representative of her 'company', is squatting prior to illegally taking possession of Jara's flat); it is the site of adultery, where Pablo's sexual excitement is heightened by the fore-knowledge of the soon-to-be-revealed crack in the wall and what that crack symbolizes both by crude physical analogy with Leonor's body and by association with Pablo's guilt about his treatment of Jara; finally it becomes a scene of revelation, a Damascene moment, when Pablo realizes Jara's true 'canalla' nature, and this in turn catalyzes the completion of his metamorphosis as character from witness, through colluder in silence, to 'canalla' player of the system himself.

Scene 3: constructing a future?

The novel ends with an unexpected twist, opening out to a future which is both a new crime scene and simultaneously moves towards idealistic construction. Pablo has left his wife, improved his dysfunctional relationship with his daughter Francisca, and – watched over by the ambiguous Mephistophelean figure of Jara (as mental projection?) – he calmly and premeditatedly begins creating a new crime scene which repeats that at the Calle Giribone. Having realized that he and Jara were not so different, Pablo is inexorably drawn to repeat the performance initiated by Jara, taking on his despicable role as faker of evidence. In order to do this, Pablo has rented a flat for himself in the Calle Tronador, specifically chosen for its precise location next to a construction site of another firm, *Arquitecto Garrido y Asociados*; in the final scene, we see him patiently beginning to construct the crack for which he will subsequently try to claim compensation from them. His declared intention, announced to Borla as he hands in his notice, is to amass enough money to build the eleven storey tower he has been obsessively drawing for the last twenty years. The tower, being a social project with a human dimension, would bring him back to his youthful idealism; yet it would be inescapably tainted, since the money for it would have been gained by corrupt means, albeit the quasi-heroic corruption of the little fish trying to beat the big fish of exploitative capitalism in the manner of Robin Hood.

The crimes, therefore, are multiple: principally, of course, the death of Jara, and its subsequent cover-up, but this acts like a stone thrown into a pond, whose widening ripples are the increasingly minor or trivial crimes surrounding it. Fraudulent behaviour on the parts of Jara, Leonor, and finally Pablo; individual moral 'crimes' of being a liar, adulterer and bad parental role model (31, 81); and even, arguably, aesthetic architectural 'crimes' of juxtaposing Le Corbusier and Tudor style buildings (82), resulting in an ensemble jokingly referred to by Pablo's friend el Tano as 'El culo y la memoria' (82) [literally 'arse and memory'][11] or eliminating them both and replacing them with bland towerblocks with 24-hour security (83). Though these are not classifiable 'crimes' in the vein of murder or manslaughter, nevertheless their relationship to the overall interpretation of the principal crime scene is significant, since they reinforce wider patterns of moral bankruptcy, neoliberalization and triumph of capitalism over aesthetics.

Who, then, is the principal criminal? Borla and Marta for their somewhat incidental and unpremeditated manslaughter of the nuisance, Jara, simply when the right circumstances presented themselves? Pablo for his complicity with Borla and Marta, out of a mixture of collegial coercion and lingering attraction to Marta? Jara for initiating fraudulent activity and repeatedly interfering in the construction process which subsequently led to his own death? Rather, Piñeiro encourages us to ask who is *not* criminal, at least to some extent?[12] In this respect, Piñeiro is once again in tune with the context of contemporary Latin American crime fiction, if we agree with Ernest Mandel's interrogation of the current state of affairs:

> Has the wheel now turned full circle? Has the systematic recourse by monopolists to illegal methods, the corruption of themselves and the state apparatus that defends their interests, reached a point where the universe of the crime story has been turned upside down and the criminal has once again, as at its origins, become an object of sympathy? (Mandel 129; quoted by Close 146).

Does Jara speak the truth when he says, with disillusion, to Pablo that: 'los peces chicos, en lugar de defender a los suyos, terminan defendiendo a los peces grandes […] para ilusionarse con que eso les permitirá llegar a ser lo que no

[11] France translates this phrase more idiomatically, though less colourfully, as 'chalk and cheese' (67).
[12] Or as the trailer for the film version puts it, 'Nadie es inocente' [Nobody is innocent].

son' (125) ['The little fish, instead of looking after their own, always end up defending the interests of the big fish […] To flatter themselves that they can become something they aren't' (France 2013: 104)]. Is it inescapably the case that humanity's crime is always wanting to climb up at the expense of those lower down, and therefore to some extent, all are victims yet all are seeking to gain advantage at the expense of others?

Constru(ct)ing a moral

'Listen! The world only exists in your eyes – your conception of it. You can make it as big or as small as you want to. And you're trying to be a little puny individual. By God, if I ever cracked, I'd try to make the world crack with me.' (F. Scott Fitzgerald 1936a).

The ending lends itself to various readings, the most obvious being the 'if you can't beat them, join them' scenario, in terms of corruption and playing the system. Everyone seems to play the system from one perspective or another; the architects' professional clout gives them a kind of impunity as regards their construction activities, whilst Jara represents the attempt of a disenfranchised and socially overlooked individual to protest against the faceless society of which he is an insignificant part, 'a little puny individual' to borrow Fitzgerald's words. Leonor also justifies her ethically dubious activities by this kind of argument, challenging Pablo to say whether he, his colleagues and people he sees on the TV like politicians all earned their money honestly, or whether they are just living in a corrupt system in which those are the rules of the game (193). Although Pablo's fraudulence may ultimately facilitate a return to the social architecture which he practised at the beginning of his career, we cannot easily recuperate Pablo as a Robin Hood style hero (as he tauntingly called Leonor's boss), since he is unprincipled in many ways, not least in his personal life and attitude to his wife. What the reader lacks here is any kind of moral baseline, a standard by which they might assign roles and judge the characters. Once the genre of crime fiction is activated, readers expect to treat everyone with suspicion initially, but by the denouement to be able to disentangle the criminals from those who expose the crimes. Piñeiro frustrates that desire, confirming her place in the *neopolicíaco*.

There is, nevertheless, a narrative gesture towards redemption, in that the catalytic affair with Leonor seems to represent a return to youthful vigour, authenticity and idealism, to something Pablo did not know he'd lost (85). His brief relationship with her makes him remember friendships, inspires him to include a human figure beside his sketch of his tower (85) and results in him deciding to travel above ground rather than underground (81-83) in order to actually *see* the city (85). (Perhaps in this respect, urging the reader to look anew at urban and architectural change in Buenos Aires is one of the subsidiary aims of this novel?) It helps Pablo to avoid life being – in the words of his friend Tano – 'nada más que un pequeño fastidio […] que no duele ni mata, pero seca' (133) ['Nothing more than a petty annoyance […] not painful, not fatal, but sapping' (France 2013: 112)]. Yet Leonor is also, in narrative terms, the classic cliché of the younger woman, and this fact somewhat weakens any redemptive narrative potential that the relationship might have. Overall, then, the moral of the tale is ambiguous, but perhaps the clues towards an interpretation are to be located by returning once more to the scene(s) of the crime(s).

Centrality of the crime scene(s) to our interpretation(s)

As has been underlined, the crime scenes in *Las grietas de Jara* are all associated directly with architectural construction, and its interaction with the surrounding social and political environment. Furthermore, they act as a

focal point for various themes: opportunism, corruption, cover-up, cracking up, but also the potential rebirth of idealism, the aesthetic, and even love. We have read the crime scenes as a kind of touchstone: for hindsight, self-scrutiny, and crisis of self. '¿Qué cambió desde entonces? Nada en hechos concretos; lo que pasó, pasó. Pero hoy sabe además qué se siente al ser un canalla' (99) ['What has changed since then? Nothing concrete; what's happened, happened. But now he knows what it feels like to be vermin' (France 2013: 82)]. Pablo's involvement with Jara, and with the crime scene at the Calle Giribone, compels him to think consciously about the process of slipping, degradation and gradual moral decline that can lead to someone becoming a criminal. Pablo meditates on the series of words that he has heard applied to himself by, respectively, Leonor, Marta, his daughter, and finally himself – ' "Raro", "especimen", "patético", […] "canalla"' (98) ['Odd. Specimen. Pathetic […] Vermin' (France 2013: 81)].

Jara had trusted in Pablo to put himself 'del lado que tiene que estar' (71) [literally, 'on the side he has to be on'].[13] This is ambiguous and turns out to be ironic; as readers, we probably interpret this as a challenge to do what is ethical, support the little fish against the powers of the big fish, and we infer that Jara is an everyday victim struggling legitimately against the corrupt system. We are led to this interpretation within the contemporary Latin American crime fiction context by the fact that, as argued by Jacovkis, a corrupt society has become the norm; the *neopolicíaco* takes as read that the system will be corrupt. However, Jara is not the innocent little fish; he is as corrupt as the system in which he participates. When Borla also voices this idea of having to take sides (176), Borla is presenting Pablo with a corrupt proposal; complicity and acting in concert. By the end, Pablo has helped to bury Jara and is complicit with Borla and Marta in covering it up, but ironically has also put himself on Jara's side by repeating his tricks with the crack in the wall, and has even gone beyond Jara by faking Jara's handwriting in a letter to Borla and Marta, thus betraying his presumed loyalty to them as co-conspirators. The sides are no longer clear cut, if they ever were.

At this point, it is instructive to return to the title of the novel, which raises various questions. Why are the 'grietas' of Jara in plural? Perhaps simply because Jara has already played the system in this way repeatedly, as is revealed by his files left in Leonor's flat. But the plural could also refer to Pablo's potentially limitless repetition of Jara's original crack in his future life strategem of exploiting the system in order to finance his utopian building plans. Likewise the plural gives the idea of Jara eponymously denoting a psychological or physical condition; we have 'las manchas de Brushfield', 'los nódulos de Virchow' [Brushfield's spots, Virchow's nodes], why not 'las grietas de Jara' [Jara's cracks]? Such a condition, manifesting itself as internal psychological cracks *à la* Scott Fitzgerald, seems to open up in all the characters. Small immoral acts lead to bigger criminal ones, potential crime scenes are everywhere, characters become 'canalla' almost without realizing.[14] This is in keeping with the tone of the Scott Fitzgerald essay, in which the author says that 'all life is a process of breaking down', but that it is not just the 'blows that do the dramatic side of the work'; there is 'another sort of blow that comes from within – that you don't feel until it's too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again.' Characters have to keep acting as if they could save themselves and others from becoming despicable, whilst

[13] France has '[O]n the right side' (2013: 58), which slightly loses Piñeiro's deliberate ambiguity.

[14] Piñeiro declares that the word 'grieta' defines the novel (Cordeu 2009), and she also discusses how this word has been manipulated politically and socially in her opening speech for the 2018 Buenos Aires International Book Fair (Piñeiro 2018).

knowing that they cannot: 'nobody is really safe' (France 2013: 25). Like Scott Fitzgerald, who talks in the same essay of balancing a sense of the 'futility of effort' and the 'necessity to struggle'. Or as the Comisario Venturini puts it in Piñeiro's earlier novel, *Betty Boo*: 'Does the fact that we have to compromise once in a while make us crooks? No, it makes us human' (France 2016: 297).

To quote Close once more, are we returning to a period of 'criminal ascendancy' (2006: 147) in contemporary Latin American crime fiction? Close observes that the 'pretense of hard-boiled objectivism in the depiction of societal corruption' is at odds with 'generic demand for just narrative closure' (2006: 150). In this novel, societal corruption is present at all levels, from the state's construction over disappearances, to architects and construction firms' sharp business practices to stay afloat in the cut-throat competition of a neoliberal economy, down to the level of individuals pursuing fraudulent means of existence. It would appear that Close's suggestion is borne out; criminality is on the ascendant at all levels of society.

The question is, therefore, do we get just narrative closure? Pablo turns 'canalla', but he is at the same time more emotionally honest with himself and his family, and perhaps will turn his 'canalla' gains to socially worthwhile ends. Have the various crime scenes performed a catalytic function in propelling Pablo Simó from a life of insincere and passive complicity into one of sincere, knowing and fully active fraudulence, undertaken in an engaged manner? Has Pablo in fact become the character of Fitzgerald's later essay, 'Pasting it Together' (1936b), who very deliberately cuts human ties in his 'new dispensation', and lives with the sign 'Cave Canem' [Beware of the Dog] above his door? The canine etymology of 'canalla' would support this rendering animal of Pablo. In such a reading, interpreting the crime scene becomes clear; the crime scene, for all its associations with performance and staging, is pivotal in revealing – indeed perhaps catalysing or bringing into existence - the true nature of characters who would otherwise be leading an inauthentic, insincere existence. Gail González, analysing Feinmann's *Últimos días de la víctima*, comments on the protagonist Mendizábal's 'personal work ethic' (2006: 42), and we can see a parallel here with the character of Pablo, whose persistence in making (utopian) architectural sketches speaks to a lingering desire for rebuilding society, a desire which gains momentum after working through the aftermath of the Jara episode. Cracking up, breaking up, excavation and demolition, but with a view to building anew. We are thus left with a message that is not so much to do with the mechanics of the classic crime novel and just punishment for misdeeds, and more to do with a ubiquitous ethical grey zone, from which positive aspirations can nevertheless momentarily emerge. Returning to the starting point of this novel's dialogue with generic conventions, the contribution this novel makes is to turn the crime scene from problem to be solved or metaphor for endemic violence into catalyst towards self-knowledge and authenticity.

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